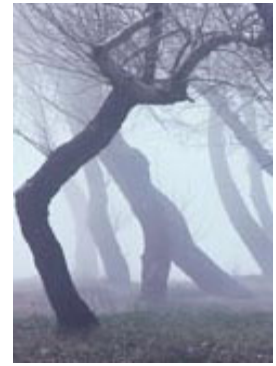


Making Life Easier Program

Seasonal Affective Disorder



Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that follows the seasons of the year. The most common type begins in late fall or early winter with symptoms receding in the spring and summer. Surveys estimate that about four to six percent of the population suffers from SAD to the degree that it affects their daily living. Women with symptoms outnumber men four to one. This type of depression usually begins in young adulthood and the risk of developing SAD decreases with age. Symptoms range in intensity and include but are not limited to:

- **persistent feelings of sadness or depression**
- **fatigue and lethargy**
- **increased appetite often with cravings for sweets and starches**
- **lack of interest in normal activities including sex**
- **social withdrawal**
- **difficulty concentrating and processing information**
- **sleep disturbances**

In a small number of cases, annual relapse occurs in the spring and summer with symptoms of depression that include insomnia, decreased appetite, and agitation or anxiety.

SAD is not the same as the “holiday blues” or even the winter doldrums which are experienced by a much greater percentage of the population. The holiday blues are related to psychosocial factors such as increased family obligations, isolation, decreased exercise, and holiday related memories. The winter doldrums may include many SAD like symptoms but the individual remains fully functional.

Scientists are not sure what causes SAD, but they suspect that changes in the availability of sunlight plays an important role. The reduced

availability of sunlight may disrupt circadian rhythms that regulate your body's internal clock and cause people to be out of step with their daily schedule. Statistics show that winter depression becomes increasingly more common the farther people live north or south of the equator. Melatonin, a sleep-related hormone, has also been linked to SAD. The hormone is produced at increased levels when the days are shorter and darker.

There is treatment for Seasonal Affective Disorder. If your symptoms are severe enough to significantly affect your daily living, "bright light therapy," also called "phototherapy," is often used to help overcome this seasonal depression. For treatment, patients obtain a special light and make sure to spend a certain amount of time in front of it each day (the severity of the depression determines how much time each person needs). Ordinary light bulbs do not provide enough light for light therapy and tanning beds should not be used to treat SAD since the light source is high in ultraviolet rays which are damaging to both eyes and skin. Your doctor may also consider prescribing antidepressant medications or recommend psychotherapy which can be helpful in identifying and modifying negative thoughts and behaviors that may play a role in bringing about signs and symptoms of SAD. It's important to consult a psychiatrist, physician, or other mental health professional who can help find the correct treatment. For mild symptoms, making sure to get outside during the day or arranging homes and workplaces to receive more sunlight may be helpful.

If you suspect that you or someone you love may be suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder, contact your Employee Assistance Program or a trained medical professional. Symptoms of SAD need to be evaluated to rule out more serious medical or psychological problems. With appropriate treatment, symptoms of SAD can be manageable. There is no need to suffer in silence.



The King County Making Life Easier Program with services provided by APS Healthcare is available to help employees and household members cope with a variety of life problems.

For confidential assistance call toll free 1-888-874-7290.



References:

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<http://www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/27.cfm>

<http://www.sada.org.uk>

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/print/seasonal-affective-disorder>

American Psychiatric Association